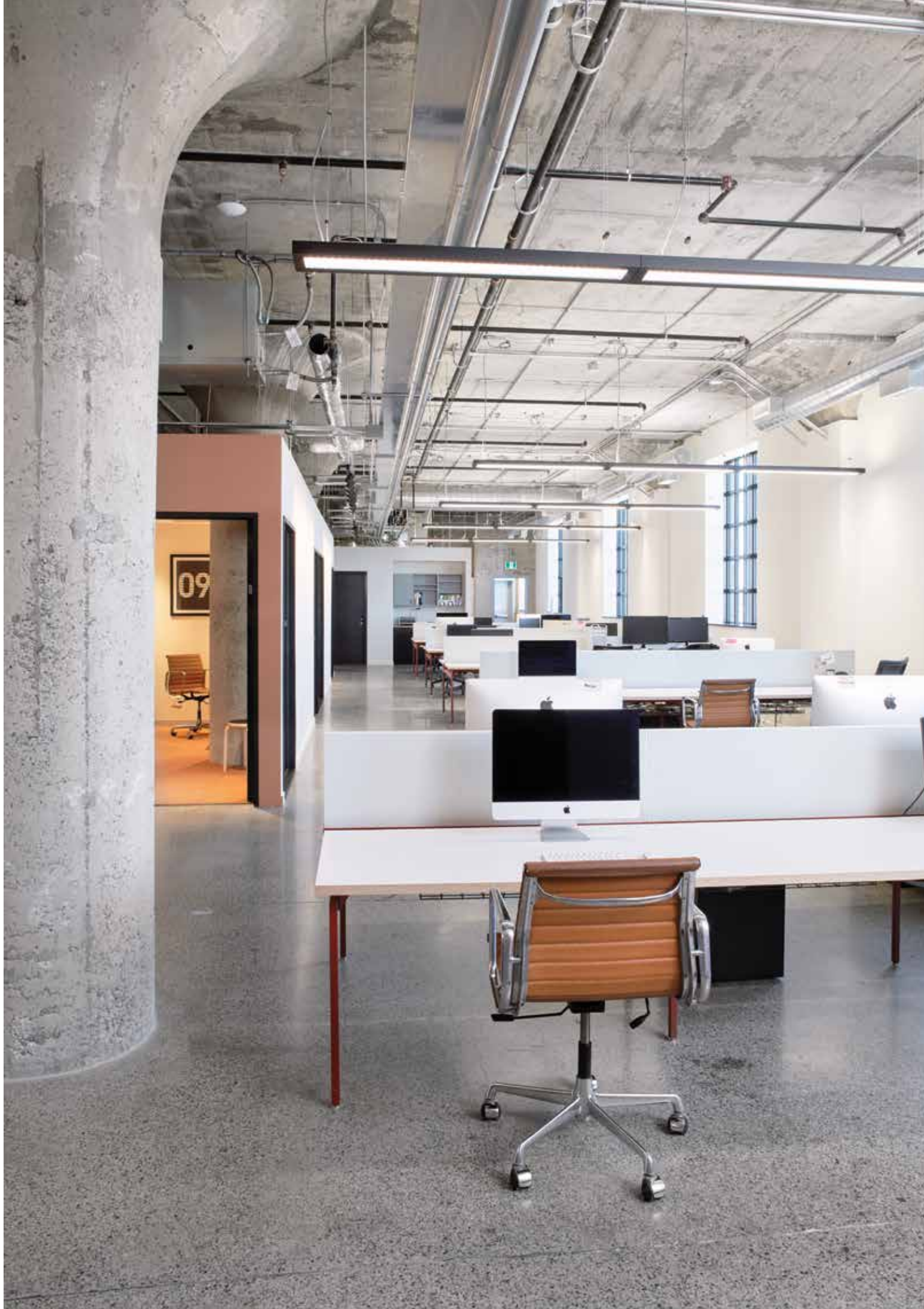


# Scandi cool

*With its concrete floors and warm woods,  
an office in a former factory in Toronto  
encapsulates why the Scandinavian  
approach works so well in Canada*

**Words by Rita Lobo  
Images by Thomas Lee**





**T**he warm glow emanating from the white oak tambour walls of the Agency 59 office is pure office hygge: cosy, stylish and functional. In fact, almost everything about this space oozes Scandinavian cool: oak pieces, polished grey concrete, felt and leather soft furnishings, and splashes of colour in shades of forest green and rust. I half expect to see an endless expanse of spruce trees and snow flurries as I look out the window but instead, I'm greeted with a post-industrial "up-and-coming" neighbourhood at the edge of a North American high-rise financial centre: Toronto.

The office in question is the new home of creative advertiser Agency 59, located in a beloved former auto-parts factory in a slightly shabby corner of west Toronto. Built in 1919, the large open-plan floorplates were designed to hold the heavy machinery. The building had been abandoned for many years before it was taken over by local artists and it is now one of the last remaining tall structures in Junction Triangle – once a thriving industrial area.

Junction Triangle has recently started to experience a second life of sorts, as artists and creative people have migrated west fleeing the city centre's sky-high rents and crowded spaces, opting instead for further away offices with unparalleled views over the Toronto skyline.

It was only a matter of time before Tower Automotive met with a similar fate. Redevelopment started in 2015, and was solidified when Toronto's Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) signed up as a flagship tenant, occupying the bottom five floors of the 10-storey building. The rest of the floors are occupied by creative enterprises.

When Agency 59 decided to move from its former home into the refurbished Tower Automotive development, it had quite particular needs, and it turned to Toronto design hot-shot MSDS Studio. "Agency 59 is a bit more traditional," explains Jessica Nakanishi, one half of the studio's founders. "They wanted a more contemporary environment for their offices. Where they came from was very compartmentalised. Everything was very much closed off, so they wanted to increase the flow and openness of work flow, but still have a good number of closed offices."

Tower Automotive presented a unique blank canvas for MSDS to work its magic, but there was also a unique set of challenges. The space is very much defined by the long, open-plan floorplate, all polished terrazzo concrete and adorned with a series of concrete

mushroom pillars. Nakanishi wanted to keep as many of the original features as possible, but in order to meet Agency 59's requirement of multiple closed-off offices adjacent to the main open-plan desk area, it was going to have to break the massive space up.

The solution was to create a floating box of offices and meeting rooms in the centre of the floor, flanked by the imposing columns. The main open-plan desk area, kitchen, smaller meeting rooms, boardroom and reception all flow uninterrupted around it. Nakanishi brought as much glass into the design of the offices as possible, not only to ensure that natural light flowed into every nook and cranny of the space – vital when the bitter Ontario winter is closing in – but also to increase ☺

**Interiors: MSDS Studio**  
**Client: Agency 59**  
**Size: 1,533sq m**  
**Duration: Apr 2017 – Sept 2018**  
**Location: Toronto**

← Open-plan desking flows around a floating box of offices

↓ Jasper Morrison chairs add colour to a bright dining area





↑ Canadian white oak tambour panels link and warm the space

→ A curved reception desk emerges from the central box volume

this sense of openness. It's almost like the anti-open-plan office – where everything feels connected, but is neatly divided.

To counter the coldness of the concrete, Nakanishi decided to cover part of the central box in bespoke Canadian white oak tambour panels. These serve to soften and warm the space, but the wood is also a connecting thread that links all the separate sections of the office. It's prevalent in the kitchen and diner area also, where Nakanishi and partner Jonathan Sabine designed a bespoke shelving solution that houses fridges and kitchen cupboards but has no back, allowing office life to merge into the kitchen seamlessly, and keeps the natural light flowing.

“There actually are very few drywall walls,” says Nakanishi. “So, we created this perforated millwork sort of partition shelving. Workers are still connected to the kitchen activity. If you wanted to speak to someone, you could

still have this flow, and then the light can still come through. So then these spaces can still get natural light, again, which is hard when you have this central block.”

MSDS Studio is also a furniture designer and maker, and its flair for woodwork shines throughout the office, in the tambour cladding and reception area, as well as the kitchen. “Jonathan’s background is in furniture-making, woodworking,” says Nakanishi. “We think about wood in almost every project we do and try to use it in different ways.

Especially when it comes to wall claddings or wall separations. We have a lot of oak in Canada, so it is available to us, and white oak is typically one that we like. That sets the tone with the concrete, of course.”

Despite this, the majority of the furniture inside is contract. It was important to keep the costs down, but also as the staff at Agency 59 swells and wanes according to the company’s changing needs, ready-to-order contract furniture allows for extra desks to be ordered at any time without ☹

*“We think about wood in almost every project we do and use it in different ways”*





→ The kitchen's terrazzo concrete bar was cast to match the original factory floors

compromising the style. Finding desks for the staff was one of the biggest challenges.

“The biggest thing was finding an uninterrupted surface so that they had the flexibility to increase,” explains Nakanishi. “Even to the extent of the seam on the table, where it met had to be as flat and seamless as possible. So, if you were working in the middle of the table you don’t feel it. It actually took us a while, but we found this particular Knoll system, and I especially like the profile of the legs.”

Though the kitchen is not in the actual centre of the floorplate, it is undoubtedly the beating heart of Agency 59. It is large, and bathed in warm natural light from two huge windows. “They definitely want it to be the

central area,” explains Nakanishi, “but we were proposing it felt more like a bar or restaurant, and they liked that idea. Instead of it feeling like a lunchroom in an office, we really wanted it to be a social hub. In the afternoon, when the sun comes in, this is such a beautiful place to work on a laptop, just to step away from your desk.”

The large-scale terrazzo concrete bar was one of the key investment pieces of the whole office, and was cast on site to match the original floors. It was complemented by soft rust leather banquettes and bench seating. A pop of colour comes courtesy of Jasper Morrison wood chairs for Emeco in forest green. “And again, the light woods,” adds the designer. “There definitely is a

particularly Scandinavian sense. The palette, the light woods and the rust leather and touches of green.”

The fact of the matter is that I’m standing on the eighth floor of a building in Canada. Any connection with Scandinavia is purely by the designers’ artifice – and that’s when the power of Scandi design and our seemingly endless appetite for it, hits me.

Upon reflection, leaning into the Scandinavian trend is a logical choice for a Canadian office. The climate is similar, so there is the same need to keep the great indoors warm, pleasant, and functional, something that MSDS Studio has grasped and delivered with success in this office, without losing that unique Toronto cool. ■